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RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0188

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TREASURY FOR GLASER/LEBENSON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/08/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: FM MUALLEM TO VISIT IRAQ?

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.5 b/d

¶1. (C) Though we have heard conflicting reports from our Syrian interlocutors, those purporting to be speaking on behalf of the regime insist Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem will visit Iraq next week, on or about November 12. Hashem Akkad, MP and Asif Shawkat intimate, told us as of November 8 the SARG was going ahead with plans to send Muallem to Iraq unless the USG had the Iraqis stop the visit. Akkad had previously categorized the trip as a last effort to see whether it was possible for the SARG to work with the Maliki government. According to Akkad, there is deep anger within the regime with PM Maliki for what regime members view as his unduly critical remarks towards the SARG. Nevertheless, there is an understanding within the SARG that better relations with the GOI were necessary, so the regime is willing to test the waters one more time.

¶2. (C) Ironically, the SARG anger towards the GOI is exactly why there is so much skepticism in Damascus on whether the trip will actually occur. As many reminded us this week, Maliki specifically, but others also in power today in Baghdad, had spent a long period of exile in Damascus. The regime feels betrayed and believes that Maliki had repaid their hospitality with hostility. One contact compared the news stories of SARG officials visiting Iraq to what used to happen with Arafat. The SARG,s disdain for Arafat was a consistent roadblock for a visit despite Arafat being rumored or even scheduled to visit many times, only to be canceled at the last minute. Sakher Altoun, a leading Damascene businessman, commented to us that he recently discussed the proposed Iraq visit with Moallem and based off of that conversation he was convinced Muallem himself was conflicted on whether to carry through with the trip.

¶3. (C) Comment. Even though conventional wisdom in Damascus expects Muallem,s trip to be cancelled at the last minute, our contacts who believe the regime wants to reengage the US remain adamant that the SARG will go through with the trip, unless the Iraqis veto it. These interlocutors, optimism seems to be based on their belief that the SARG would like to make a positive public gesture towards the West following the recent string of European visitors. Still, even if Muallem does travel to Iraq, the real significance of the visit will be based on its results.
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